"You're just like a trained race horse, Penny," he said jokingly. "But your work is okay. You're improving."

Penny brightened at the praise, for Editor DeWitt was not given to complimentary words as a rule. Hurriedly washing carbon paper stains from her hands, she caught a bus which took her within a block of Ben's shack.

Smoke curled from the chimney, and as she thumped on the sagging door, she detected the odor of cooking bacon.

"Come in, come in!" Ben greeted her heartily. "You're just in time to share my supper. You got my note?"

"Yes, I did, Ben. What's up?"

Without answering, the former reporter stepped aside for her to enter. The room was much cleaner than when Penny last had visited it. Ben looked better too. Although his clothes remained unpressed, his hair had been cut, and there was a brightness to his eyes which she instantly noted.

"You've found work?" she surmised.

"Odd jobs," Ben answered briefly. "After talking to you I made up my mind I'd better snap out of it. If I can't find newspaper work, I'll try something else."

"I was thinking—" Penny sat down in a rickety



chair, "—couldn't you do free lance work? Write stories for newspapers out of town?"

"Without a typewriter? I put mine in hock months ago, and it finally was sold for charges."

"I have a typewriter at home, Ben. I'll lend it to you."

Ben's face brightened, but he hesitated. "I've sure been lost without a machine," he declared. "But I hate to take yours. You know what happened to my watch. This shack isn't safe. Anyone might come in here and steal it."

"It's only an old typewriter, Ben. I'm willing to take a chance. I'll see that you get the machine within a day or so."

The former reporter stepped to the stove to turn the bacon. He kept his face averted as he said: "Penny, you've been a real friend—the only one. That day when you met me—well, I didn't give a darn. I was only one step from walking off a dock."

"Don't say such things, Ben!" Penny warned. "You've had a run of hard luck, but it's changing now. Suppose you tell me what you learned about the *Snark*."

"Nothing too startling, so don't get your hopes up," Ben grinned.

He set out two cracked plates on the battered table, two cups for coffee, and then dished up the bacon and

a few fried potatoes. It was a meagre supper, but not for the world would Penny have offended Ben by refusing to share it.

"Now tell me about the *Snark*," she urged again, as Ben poured the coffee.

"I've been watching the boat at night, Penny. Queer things go on there."

"We suspected that after seeing Webb pitched overboard."

"I've seen a lot of men come and go from that vessel," Ben resumed. "It's a cinch they couldn't all be employed on her, because the *Snark* has been out of service for months."

"What do you make of it?"

"Oh, the *Snark* is being used as a meeting place—that's obvious. Just for the fun of it, I sneaked aboard last night."

"What did you learn, Ben?"

"The men were having a confab in one of the cabins. I couldn't hear much, but enough to gather that they are afraid Webb will talk to the police."

"About what, Ben?"

"Didn't learn that part. I aim to keep tab on the place for a while."

Penny told of seeing Webb that afternoon and also of his association with Professor Bettenridge.

"A secret ray machine, my eye!" Ben exploded. "You may be sure it's a fake if Webb has anything to do with it! Penny, this is no business for you to be mixed up in. Webb is a dock rat and as surly an egg as I ever met. You ought to give him a wide berth."



"I'll certainly be careful," Penny promised, arising. "Sorry to leave you with the dishes, Ben, but I must run or I'll be late for another appointment."

She really hated to go, for she saw that her companionship had made the young man more cheerful. Ben walked with her through the waterfront district, and then reluctantly said goodbye.

Hastening along the shadowy street, Penny noticed the large electric sign on top of the Gables Hotel.

Impulsively, she stopped at the hotel.

"That Navy official Professor Bettenridge spoke of may have arrived," she thought. "Just to make certain, I'll inquire again."

CHAPTER

# 15

## *THE DEMONSTRATION*

PENNY WAS due to meet Salt Sommers in ten minutes, but if she were late, she knew he would not leave without her.

Entering the crowded hotel, she waited her turn at the desk and then inquired if any Navy officers had registered.

"Not to my knowledge," the clerk replied, consulting the register. "No, we've not had a Navy man in for at least a week."

"Any Army officers?"

"The last was a sergeant who checked out two weeks ago. Most of our guests rent on a monthly basis. We have only a few rooms for transient guests."

"Can you tell me if a Professor Bettenridge has called here in the last few days?"

"Not while I've been at the desk."

The information convinced Penny she had not misjudged the professor. She now was satisfied he never had arranged with Navy officers to inspect his ray machine. Instead, he had misinformed Mr. Johnson, no doubt hoping to impress him that others were interested in the invention.





Quickly leaving the hotel, Penny hastened on to the news office. As she passed near the loading platform, Salt hailed her from a car parked there.

"Here I am," he called.

Penny slid into the front seat beside him, apologizing for being late.

"That's okay," returned Salt, shifting into gear. "But we haven't much time unless we hurry. You know the way, don't you?"

"I do by daylight. And I think I can find the farmhouse, even if it should get dark before we reach there."

Salt was a fast and very skillful driver. He chose the less frequented streets and soon they were in the open. They made excellent time, reaching their destination just as it began to grow dark.

"How shall we explain to the professor?" Penny inquired dubiously as the photographer parked the car under an oak tree along the highway. "He may think it strange that I returned."

"Let him," said Salt, unconcerned. "I'm here to get my camera."

"Don't go at him too hard," Penny pleaded. "After

all, there is a chance I was mistaken about the license number. In my excitement the night of the explosion, I may have remembered a wrong figure."

"That's so," Salt acknowledged gloomily. "Well, we'll see."

"Why not pretend we're here to get a feature story for the *Star?*" Penny suggested impulsively. "That way, I could ask him all the questions I like about the secret ray machine."

"Any way you want to do it," Salt agreed amiably.

He locked the car and they walked to the farmhouse. Learning that the professor and his wife were at the lake, they trudged down the lane.

"Wait!" Penny suddenly warned in a whisper.

Clutching Salt's arm, she drew him into the shadow of a tree. At first he could not understand the need for caution. Then as Penny pointed, he saw a hunched figure with a lighted lantern, walking along the lake shore away from the cabin where Professor Bettenridge's ray machine was kept.

"There goes Webb now!" Penny whispered. "He's evidently going to the shack where the mines are stored."

"What's he carrying?" Salt inquired.

Although too far away to see plainly, they thought that he had a small satchel tucked under his arm. As he drew closer they discerned that it was leather, and



apparently used as a container for a long cylinder-shaped object.

Passing a short distance away, the man did not see Salt or Penny. They watched until they saw the red glow of his lantern vanish over a hillock.

"That's the foot-path to the shack where the mines are stored," Penny commented. "I wonder what's inside the satchel?"

"Shall we try to find out?"

"Let's talk to Professor Bettenridge first," Penny proposed, going down the lane.

The door of the cabin stood slightly ajar. Inside the lighted room were the professor, his wife, Mr. Johnson, and several other persons Penny had never seen before. However, she took them to be town residents who had heard of the test and were eager to see it.

"Well, professor," they heard Mr. Johnson say jovially. "We're all here, so why not go ahead? Show us what the machine will do."

"All in good time, all in good time," the professor rejoined. "You must give my assistant an opportunity to drop the mine into the lake. He will signal us by lantern when he is ready."

Penny tapped on the door. The professor whirled around, decidedly startled. Then, observing Salt and Penny, he abruptly came over to speak to them.

"Well?" he asked in a tone which was not friendly.

"We came to see the demonstration," Penny said brightly.

"Glad to have you," the professor replied, though without cordiality.

"We want to write a feature story about your machine too," Penny continued. "For the newspaper."

The request displeased the professor. Scowling, he said curtly:

"I am sorry, but there must be no publicity at this time—orders of the Navy, you know."

"The Navy is interested in buying your machine?" Penny asked, hoping to lead him on.

"The deal is concluded except for my signature," the professor said, darting a quick glance at Mr. Johnson. "I should have signed at once, but I promised Mr. Johnson first chance to buy the machine."

"I suppose the Navy men are in town now?" Penny inquired.

"In Riverview."

"At the Gables Hotel?" Penny pursued the subject.

The professor looked at her sharply, for the first time suspecting that she was inducing him to reveal far too much.

Without answering, he turned his back, and began to talk to Mr. Johnson about technical details of the machine.

"I am convinced it is a wonderful invention," the latter declared. "But before I invest $200,000, I must



be absolutely certain that it will do everything you claim."

"You shall not be disappointed," reassured the professor. "Only be patient for a few minutes, and you will witness a demonstration that will convince you beyond a shadow of a doubt."

Ignored by the professor and his wife, Penny and Salt did not enter the cabin. Instead, they walked a short distance away to discuss their next move.

"The demonstration won't start for a few minutes," the photographer said. "Suppose we ankle down to the lake and find out what Webb is doing."

Proceeding down the path which led around the lake shore, they soon sighted the man's glowing lantern. He had set it down on the ground while he trundled out one of the heavy mines from the shack. As they watched from a distance, he loaded it into a boat, picked up the lantern, and slowly rowed out into the lake.

"Apparently he's going to drop it overboard for the test," Salt said. "While he's out there, let's take a look in the shack."

He tried the door. It was locked.

"I don't know how it's done, but I'm sure those mines are doctored in some way," Penny declared. "Louise and I saw Webb working on one when we were here yesterday, but what he did I couldn't guess."

"We'll learn nothing here," Salt said. "Let's go

back to the cabin and see how the professor pulls off the demonstration. Apparently he has Mr. Johnson two-thirds convinced already."

"Whatever you do, don't get into an argument with the professor about your camera until after the test," Penny pleaded as they started up the slope again. "I want to watch the demonstration. If you accuse him of deliberately keeping the camera, he may throw us out."

"Okay, I'll wait," Salt promised.

Reaching the cabin, the pair became instantly aware of a tenseness in the attitude of the professor and his wife. Although they did not tell the newcomers they were unwelcome, it was evident by their expressions that they distrusted Penny and Salt.

Professor Bettenridge stood behind his machine, explaining its many parts to the awed spectators. Penny could make nothing of the technical jargon.

"The demonstration will soon start," the professor declared, looking at his watch. "I will turn on the motors now, as they must heat for several minutes."

He turned several switches and the room was filled with a low humming sound. Two tiny lights buried deep in the complicated mechanism began to glow a cherry red. The professor bent low over the machine, frowning thoughtfully. He adjusted three of the concave mirrors, and switched on another motor.

Despite a dubious attitude, Penny found herself be-



coming deeply impressed. Was it possible, she wondered, that she had misjudged the professor and his machine? She dismissed the thought. The mine never would explode unless it had been tampered with —she was certain of that.

"Watch closely now," the professor directed. "At any moment my assistant will signal with his lantern that he has dropped the mine and is safely away from the area."

The professor's wife had gone to the doorway. Tensely she watched the lake. Minutes passed. Then from out on the water, there came a moving circle of red—the signal from Webb.

"Now!" exclaimed the professor's wife.

Everyone in the little cabin held his breath. Dramatically, Professor Bettenridge took a metal tuning fork and struck it sharply against the crystal ball in the center of his machine.

"It will take a moment for the sound to reach the lake," he said softly. "But only a moment. Watch closely."

All persons in the room crowded to the door and the windows. Suddenly a huge burst of flame appeared on the lake, fanning out on the surface of the water. A moment later came the dull boom of a terrific explosion.

CHAPTER

# 16

## *SUSPICION*

EVERYONE WHO witnessed the spectacular demonstration was awed by the sight of the flames rising above the lake. As they died away, Professor Bettenridge, strutting a bit, walked back to his machine and covered it with the canvas hood.

"Now are you satisfied?" he inquired triumphantly. "Is there anyone here who doubts the remarkable possibilities of my invention?"

"It was a fine demonstration! Magnificent!" approved Mr. Johnson, fairly beside himself with excitement. "I am convinced of the machine's worth and if we can agree upon terms I will write you a check tonight."

Professor Bettenridge's expression did not change, but the brief glance he flashed his wife was not lost upon Penny or Salt.

"You understand, of course," he said smoothly,





"that the Navy probably will insist upon ultimate purchase of the machine even if I relinquish ownership?"

"Certainly," agreed Mr. Johnson. "I should expect to make such a sale. The machine would have no practical use except in warfare."

Penny was tempted to ask the man if he considered it patriotic to try to obtain control of a machine in the hope of selling it to the government at a high profit to himself. But she wisely remained silent.

Salt, however, had a few pointed remarks to offer.

"How come," he observed, "that if this invention is so remarkable, the Navy hasn't already snapped it up?"

Professor Bettenridge froze him with a glance. "Young man," he said cuttingly, "you evidently do not understand how government business is conducted. Negotiations take months to complete. My wife and I need cash, so for that reason, we are willing to sell the machine quickly."

"Yesterday I understood you to say that Navy men were ready to complete the deal," Penny interposed innocently. "Did they change their minds?"

"Certainly not!" Professor Bettenridge's dark eyes flashed, and only by great effort did he maintain control of his temper. "You understand that while their recommendation would eventually be acted upon, a sale still would take many months to complete."

"Will your machine explode mines on land as well as in the water?" Salt inquired.

"Of course!"

"Then why not give us a land demonstration?"

"Us!" the professor mocked, his patience at an end. "Young man, you were not invited here, and I might add that your presence irritates me! Are you in any way associated with Mr. Johnson?"

"I am not."

"Then kindly do not inject yourself into our negotiations."

"The young man raises an interesting point," Mr. Johnson interposed, frowning thoughtfully. "Perhaps we should have a land demonstration before I pay over the money."

"So you doubt my honesty?" the professor demanded.

"Not at all. It's only that I must be very careful before I purchase such an expensive machine. I must satisfy myself that it will do everything you claim for it."

"You have just witnessed a successful demonstration. What more do you ask?"

"A successful water test," Salt remarked softly, "does not necessarily mean a successful land test."

"I think we should have a land test," Mr. Johnson decided. "If you convince me that the machine will work equally well under such circumstances, I will write the check instantly."



"A land test is impossible," the professor said stiffly.

"But why?" inquired Mr. Johnson.

"The dangers are too great. Windows would be smashed for many miles around. Authorities would not permit such a test. Only with the greater difficulty did I obtain permission to discharge the mines under water."

"I had not thought of that," Mr. Johnson acknowledged. He hesitated, and it was evident that in another moment he would decide to purchase the machine without further tests.

"Mr. Johnson, I suppose you have witnessed tests made with your own mines," Penny interposed. "Or have they all been made with those supplied by the professor?"

The remark infuriated Mr. and Mrs. Bettenridge, as she had expected it would.

"You and this young man are trying to discredit my machine!" he exclaimed wrathfully. "Please leave."

"Why, certainly," agreed Penny, but made no move to depart.

Seeds of suspicion already had been implanted in Mr. Johnson's mind.

"The young lady is right," he said. "I should request a test on a mine which I provide myself."

"Ridiculous!" snapped the professor. "The machine will work equally well on any mine."

"Then surely you should not object to one further test?"

"The delay is unnecessary."

"I am certain I can provide a mine within two days," insisted Mr. Johnson. "Suppose we set the next test for Thursday night at this same hour?"

Thus trapped, Professor Bettenridge could not refuse without losing the sale. Scowling, he gave in.

"Very well. But this will be the final demonstration. If you are not satisfied Thursday night, the deal is off."

"Agreed," said Mr. Johnson.

Bowing to the Bettenridges, he departed. Others who had witnessed the demonstration began to melt away. Only Salt and Penny remained.

Professor Bettenridge closed the door so that the conversation would not be overheard. Then he turned angrily to the pair.

"Now what's your little game?" he demanded. "You deliberately tried to queer my sale? Why?"

"Mr. Johnson seems like such an innocent little rabbit, maybe we thought he ought to be protected," Salt drawled.

"Protected! Why, he's being given the opportunity of a lifetime! How much is it worth to you to keep out of my affairs?"



"Not a cent," Salt retorted. "We don't want any part of your deal. But there's something I did come here for—my camera."

"I've already told the young lady I know nothing about it. If you were stupid enough to throw it into a passing automobile, then you deserve to lose it. Now get out!"

Salt was tempted to argue the matter, but Penny took his arm, pulling him toward the door. The professor slammed it hard behind them as they went out into the night.

"That fellow is a crook!" Salt exploded. "I'll bet a cookie he has my camera too!"

"Well, we can't prove it," Penny sighed. "After all, we did act in a high-handed way. We may have queered his sale to Mr. Johnson."

"A good thing if we have."

"But we have no proof the machine is a fake. With our own eyes we saw the mine explode. Of course, we think Webb tampered with it in some fashion, but we're not certain of that either."

"The proof of the pudding will come Thursday night when and if the old boy explodes Mr. Johnson's mine."

"He's just clever enough to do it, too," Penny said gloomily.

The couple had walked only a short distance up the lane when they were startled to hear a shrill

whistle in the darkness. It came from the beach.

Halting, they waited. In a moment the sound was repeated. Then to their surprise, came an answering whistle from inside Professor Bettenridge's cabin.

"That must be Webb," Salt whispered, observing a shadowy form approaching. "The whistle evidently is a signal to make certain the coast is clear."

As they watched, the hunched figure emerged from the darkness, was silhouetted momentarily in the light which came from the cabin, then disappeared inside.

"I wish we knew what they were talking about in there," Penny said. "It might clear up some of the mystery."

"Why not see what we can learn?" proposed Salt. "It's safe enough."

Taking care to walk softly, the pair stole back to the cabin. Crouching by the window, they could hear a low murmur of voices inside. At first it was difficult to catch the trend of the conversation, but gradually Professor Bettenridge's voice grew louder.

"I don't like it any better than you do," Salt and Penny heard him say, "but that's the way it is. If we're to finish the deal, we've got to explode one of Johnson's mines Thursday night. The question is, can we do it?"

"Depends on the type of mine," Webb replied gruffly. "How soon can we have it ahead of the test?"



"I'll insist that he deliver it here at least by afternoon. Will that give you time enough?"

"Sure, it won't take more than a half hour to fix 'er for the test, providing it can be done. But I ain't makin' no promises until I see the mine."

"It's a chance we have to take," Professor Bettenridge said. "The deal would have gone through tonight if it hadn't been for a couple of young newspaper fools who came nosing around here. They may make us trouble Thursday night too."

"I ain't aimin' to get mixed with the police," Webb said uneasily. "If this deal don't go through Thursday night, I'm quitting. We're in a mighty risky business."

"But we stand to make at least $200,000," the professor reminded him. "You'll get a third cut. If Johnson holds off Thursday night, I'll drop to $100,000. The thing we've got to do is to pull off that test okay and clear out."

Penny and Salt had heard enough to be certain that the men with whom they were dealing were crooks of the first rank. Slipping noiselessly away, they trudged to the car.

"Now what do we do?" Penny questioned. "Notify the police?"

"We could," Salt debated, "but so far, it's only our word against Professor Bettenridge's. He'd probably convince the police he was only a crack-pot inventor

who thought he had a wonderful machine. They might let him go."

"Any other ideas?"

"A slick trick would be to fix that mine so it won't explode. That automatically would cause complications and probably delay the deal with Mr. Johnson."

"Just how do you propose to fix Mr. Johnson's mine?" Penny inquired. "It would take some doing."

"The mines are all kept in that shack on the beach?"

"Yes, Louise and I saw Webb working on one of them there. Evidently it was the one the professor exploded tonight."

"He must have doctored it in some special way. Probably an untampered mine won't explode."

"He'll fix Mr. Johnson's mine the same way, and then the test will appear successful."

Salt nodded gloomily. He was lost in thought for several minutes, and then he grinned.

"Maybe I have an idea!"

"What is it, Salt?"

The photographer switched on the car ignition. "Wait until Thursday night," he replied. "Can you get away from the office early?"

"Well, I really shouldn't—"

"I'll take care of that part," Salt said briskly. "Just sit tight, Penny. You and I will have some fun out of this affair yet, and maybe we'll save Mr. Johnson a tidy sum of money."

CHAPTER

# 17

## *MAJOR BRYAN*

IT WAS nearly midnight by the time Penny reached home. Mrs. Weems had gone to bed, but a light still burned in the study where Mr. Parker was working on a speech he expected to deliver the following day before the Chamber of Commerce.

"Well, I'm glad you finally decided to come home," he remarked severely. "Since my little daughter became Tillie the Toiler, she seems to have developed independent hours."

"Wait until you hear where I've been," Penny said, sinking into an easy chair beside his desk. "Dad, you won't blame me for staying out late when I tell you what I saw and heard."

Eagerly she related all that had occurred, and was pleased to note that the story interested her father.

"Tell me more about Professor Betteridge," he urged. "Describe him."

"He looks very scholarly, but his language doesn't fit the part," Penny recalled. "He's tall and thin and his nose is very pointed. Middle aged, which might mean forty-five or maybe fifty. That's about all I noticed except that he has a quick way of darting his eyes about. And he wears glasses."

"From your description, he sounds like the same person I heard about this afternoon," Mr. Parker commented.

"Someone told you of his experiments at the lake?"

"Quite the contrary. An Army officer, Major Alfred Bryan called at my office this afternoon, seeking information about a man who may be Professor Bettenridge."

"Was he interested in buying the machine for the Army, Dad?"

Mr. Parker dipped his pen in ink, wrote a few lines, and then looked up again. "No, Major Bryan was sent here to trace a man who has several charges against him. At one time he impersonated an officer and in recent months has been swindling persons by various schemes. He pretends to sell Army or Navy surplus war goods."

"That doesn't sound like Professor Bettenridge, Dad."

"Perhaps not, but from your description it could be the same man. This secret ray machine business sounds phoney to me. Most crooks try more than one



game—the mine exploding trick may be his latest scheme to fleece gullible victims."

"Do you think we should report the professor to the police, Dad?"

"It might be a better idea to send Major Bryan to see him," Mr. Parker returned thoughtfully. "If the professor should prove to be the man he's after, then the Army would take over."

"Where is Major Bryan now, Dad?"

"He didn't mention the name of his hotel, because at the time he called at my office, I had no thought I could assist him in any way. However, he expected to stay in Riverview several days. It shouldn't be so hard to trace him. I'll get busy tomorrow."

Tired from her adventures of the night, Penny soon went to bed. The next day Mr. DeWitt gave her several interesting assignments, and when one of the stories appeared in the final edition of the *Star*, it bore a neat little "By Penny Parker," under the headline.

"Getting on in the world, I see," Elda Hunt observed sarcastically.

Not even the unkind remark could dull Penny's pleasure. She had earned her way on the newspaper by hard, routine work. The by-line meant that she had turned in an excellent well-written story. Elda, whose writing lacked crispness and originality, only once had seen her own name appear in the *Star*. Penny felt a trifle sorry for her.

"There's no fairness around here," Elda complained in a whine. "I've worked over a year. What do I have to show for it? Not even a raise."

Penny did not try to tell the girl it was her own fault, that her attitude toward her work was entirely wrong. Elda must learn for herself.

Not until Wednesday did Penny have a chance to ask her father if he had traced Major Bryan.

"To tell you the truth, the matter slipped my mind," he confessed ruefully. "I've had one conference after another all day long. Tomorrow I'll certainly try to find him."

Penny reminded him of his promise on the following day. Mr. Parker, after telephoning several places, found the major registered at the St. Regis hotel, not far from the Parker home. However, the army officer had left for the day, and was not expected to return before nightfall.

"Oh, dear," fretted Penny, "that may be too late. If Professor Bettenridge is successful in his demonstration tonight, he may rake in Mr. Johnson's money and skip town before the major even sees him."

"It's unlikely the professor will leave without cashing the check, Penny. And banks will not be open until nine o'clock tomorrow."

"I'd feel safer to have police take over," Penny sighed. "If only we could prove charges against Bettenridge!"



"He hasn't swindled anyone yet," her father reminded her. "Learn what you can tonight, and if the sale goes through, we'll then turn him over to the police."

"It may be too late then."

"I think not," smiled her father. "You always were a little impatient, Penny."

Eagerly Penny awaited the arrival of evening and another adventure at Blue Hole Lake. She and Salt arranged to leave the office at four o'clock, hoping to reach the farmhouse early enough to observe what preparations Webb made for exploding Mr. Johnson's mine.

But at three, Salt was sent on an important assignment.

"I'll get back as soon as I can," he promised Penny, pausing beside her desk. "I may be a little late, but we'll still make it."

"I'll be right here waiting," Penny grinned.

At ten minutes past four Salt returned. Thinking he might have pictures to develop before he would be free to leave, Penny did not rush him by going back to the photography room right away. When she had typed her last story of the day and brought it to the editor's desk for inspection, she gathered up her purse and hat.

"Leaving early, aren't you?" Elda inquired in a loud voice so that everyone would notice.

"That's right," Penny replied, without explaining her special mission.

Not wishing to leave the city without ample funds, she first went downstairs to cash a pay check at the company treasurer's window. He gave her the crisp five dollar bills, joking with her about skipping town with so much money.

Penny tucked the bills into her purse and was turning to go back upstairs again, when through the window she saw a man coming down the alley from the rear of the *Star* building. Recognizing him as Mr. McClusky, the deep sea diver she had assisted, she darted to the window and rapped to attract his attention.

Not hearing her, he walked hurriedly on, and was lost in the crowd of the street.

"Wonder what he was doing here?" she thought as she slowly climbed the stairs. "Perhaps he came to see me. But in that case, he probably would have come up the front way."

Dismissing the matter from her mind, she sought Salt in the photography room. The outside gallery was empty, though the photographer's hat and coat hung on a hook by the window.

"Salt!" she called, thinking he must be in the darkroom.

No one answered. Nevertheless, a strange feeling Penny could not have explained, took possession of



her. She sensed a presence somewhere near as if she were being watched.

Nervously Penny stepped to the door of the darkroom. She tapped lightly on it, but there was no answer.

Suddenly fearful, she jerked open the door and groped for a light. As the tiny room blazed with illumination, she uttered a startled gasp.

Almost at her feet, cheek against the floor, lay Salt Sommers.

CHAPTER

# 18

## *A SECOND TEST*

AS PENNY knelt beside Salt, he stirred slightly and raised a hand to his head. She saw then that there was a tiny break in the skin which also was slightly discolored. Either the photographer had fallen or he had been slugged.

Before she could go for help, he sat up, staring at her in a bewildered manner. Penny assisted him to a chair, and dampening a handkerchief with water from the tap above the developer trays, applied it to his forehead.

"What happened?" she inquired anxiously when Salt seemed able to speak.

"Slugged," he answered in disgust.

"By whom?"

"Don't know. The fellow must have been in the darkroom when I came here to develop my films. Fact is, I thought I heard someone moving around. I





stepped to the door to see, and bing! That's the last I knew."

"Has anything been taken, I wonder?" Switching on another light, Penny glanced over the room. The drawer of a filing cabinet where old films and plates were kept, remained open.

"Someone may have been looking in there!" she commented. "Salt, whoever he is, he must be searching for a film he is afraid we'll publish in the paper."

"Maybe so," Salt agreed, holding a hand to his throbbing forehead. "But I don't know of any picture we have that would damage anyone."

Penny stepped to the doorway of the darkroom. In the larger room, the skylight remained closed. It was impossible to tell if anyone had entered the building in that way.

Some distance down the hall was a seldom-used stairway which led to the roof. Finding a door opening into it, Penny climbed the steps to look about. The rooftop was deserted, but in the building directly across from the *Star*, a corridor window remained open.

"How easy it would be for a man to step out onto the roof from there," she thought. "If the skylight or the stairway door were unlocked, he easily could enter the *Star* photography room without being seen."

Across the way, in the adjoining building, a man stood at an office window, watching Penny curiously.

Sun glared on the panes so his face was distorted. But from the location of the window, she felt certain it was Mr. Cordell.

After a moment, Penny turned and went back down the stairs. The exit at its base was barred by a door with a rusty key in the lock.

Passing through, Penny locked it, and slipped the key into her purse.

"That should stop our prowler for a few days," she thought.

In the photography room again, she checked the skylight, and finding it locked, was convinced that this time the mysterious visitor had entered the building by means of the stairs. She knew the door was usually kept locked, but undoubtedly the janitor had been careless.

By this time Salt was feeling much better. While Penny waited, he explained to the editor why the photos would not be ready until morning, then declared he was ready to start for Blue Hole Lake.

"Do you really feel like going?" Penny asked dubiously.

"Sure thing," the photographer insisted. "It takes more than a little tap on the head to put me out of running."

Salt walked a trifle unsteadily as they went down the back stairs together, but once they were in the press car, he seemed his usual jovial self.



"Now tell me about that plan of yours for tonight," Penny urged as they jounced along the country road.

"It's not much of a plan," the photographer confessed ruefully. "First, we've got to learn exactly what Webb does to those mines to make them explode. Then somehow we'll have to undo the work to cause the demonstration to turn out a flop."

"It sounds like a big order," Penny sighed. "We'll need plenty of luck to carry it out. Especially as we're arriving rather late."

Having no intention of announcing their presence, the pair drew up about a quarter of a mile from the lake, parking in a side road.

Shadows were casting long arms over the ground as they started hurriedly across the fields toward the beach. They had covered two thirds of the distance when Penny suddenly caught Salt's arm, pointing toward the lake.

"Look!" she exclaimed. "There they are now!"

Out on the lake a barge-type boat was being steered toward the beach near the shack where Professor Bettenridge stored the mines. The watching couple recognized three persons aboard the craft, the professor, Mr. Johnson and Webb. The barge also bore a large mine, similar in type to those Penny had seen inside the shack.

"That must be the mine Mr. Johnson is supplying for the test tonight," she whispered.

Hand in hand, Penny and Salt crept closer to the shore. The boat grated on the sand and Webb, with the professor helping him, carried the heavy mine toward the building.

"If the mine is to be exploded tonight, wouldn't it be easier to leave it on the barge ready to drop into the lake?" Penny commented. "Webb and the professor must have a special reason for hauling it ashore."

"I think you have something there," Salt observed. "Obviously, they're going to doctor it in some way. We'll see what happens."

Webb unlocked the door of the shack and the two men carried the mine inside. Creeping still closer to the building, Salt and Penny heard Mr. Johnson say:

"Just a minute. I see you have other mines stored here. How am I to be sure that the one exploded will be the mine I have provided?"

"You may mark it if you wish," the professor replied. "In fact, we prefer that you do, so there can be no possible doubt in your mind. Take this pocket knife and scratch your initials on the covering of the mine. Then tonight, before it is dumped in the lake, you may check again to see there has been no substitution."

"You understand, I don't distrust you," Mr. Johnson said, ill at ease. "But so much money is at stake—"

"I understand your attitude perfectly," the professor replied. "Certainly you are entitled to take every precaution."



A silence ensued, and Penny and Salt assumed that Mr. Johnson was scratching his initials on the mine.

"Now suppose we have dinner at the village inn," the professor presently suggested. "Then we will have the demonstration."

"Must we wait so long before setting off the mine?" Mr. Johnson inquired.

"Yes, village authorities gave permission for the test to be held at nine o'clock," the professor explained. "My own preference would be to get it over immediately, but I dare not disobey their orders."

Mr. Johnson made no reply, and a few minutes later, the three men walked away. No sooner had they disappeared up the lake than Penny and Salt came out of hiding from among the trees.

"You have to hand it to Professor Bettenridge," commented the photographer with grudging praise. "He's a smooth talker. I'll bet a frosted cookie the test could be held at one time as well as another so far as the village authorities are concerned. He has a special reason for wanting it at nine o'clock."

"Probably to give Webb time enough to work on the mine or exchange them," Penny said, and then frowned thoughtfully. "But what if the machine actually should work? After all, the professor agreed

to explode Mr. Johnson's mine, and apparently he's marked it with his initials. It won't be easy to substitute another one now."

"All the same, if I'm any good at guessing, it will be done. Now what shall we do until nine o'clock? Grab ourselves something to eat?"

Penny was about to suggest that they drive to a village cafe, when she noticed Webb returning alone from up the beach. Barely did the pair have time to duck out of sight behind a boulder before he approached.

Walking directly to the shack, he unlocked the door, and entered.

"Now this must be where the hocus-pocus begins!" Salt whispered. "We've got to find out what he does to that mine."

"Louise and I climbed up in that tree the other day and looked through the glass in the top."

"Then that's the trick for us! Come on!"

Making no sound, the pair climbed the tree close beside the shack. Noiselessly, they inched their way toward the skylight, and lying flat, peered down into the dark interior.

Webb had lighted a lantern which he hung on a wall nail. Unaware that he was being watched, he squatted in front of the mine which bore Mr. Johnson's initials, studying it thoughtfully.

Muttering to himself, he next took a powerful



ratchet drill, and for a long time worked with it on the mine, boring a tiny but deep hole.

"I'm getting stiff in this position," Penny whispered. "What is he doing, Salt?"

"Don't know," the photographer admitted, puzzled. "Apparently, he's doctoring Mr. Johnson's mine so it will explode tonight, but I'm not smart enough to figure how the trick will be accomplished."

By now it was so dark that the pair in the tree no longer feared they would be seen. Keeping perfectly still, they watched the work in the room below.

"It's clear why Professor Bettenridge set nine o'clock for the demonstration," Salt whispered. "Webb needed all this time to get the mine ready."

"And that's why they brought it here instead of dumping it into the lake," Penny added. "But how can they make the mine explode at exactly the right moment?"

After Webb had worked for a while longer, he arose and stretched his cramped muscles. Going to a cupboard, he removed a white powder from a glass tube, and carefully inserted it in the hole he had just made in the mine. As a final act, he sealed the tiny hole with another material, and polished the surface so that the place did not show.

"Slick work!" Salt commented. "By the time he's through, no one ever could tell the mine has been touched! Certainly not that thick-skulled Johnson."

Apparently satisfied with his work, Webb put away his tools, made a final inspection of the mine, and then left the shack. After carefully locking the door, he disappeared into the night.

"Now what's our move?" Penny asked as she and Salt finally slid down from their uncomfortable perch. "Shall we tell Mr. Johnson what we just saw?"

"We could, but he might not believe us. Penny, I have a better idea! If we can get inside the shack—"

"But it's locked!"

"The skylight may be open." Salt climbed up on the roof to investigate, but to his disappointment, the roof window was tightly fastened from inside.

"We could smash the glass," Penny suggested dubiously.

Salt shook his head. "That would give the whole thing away. No, I think we can get inside another way, but we'll have to work fast! Now that Webb has the mine ready for the demonstration, the professor and Mr. Johnson may show up here at any minute."

CHAPTER

# 19

## *THE LANTERN SIGNAL*

SALT EXPLAINED that he intended to pick the lock of the shack door.

"When I worked the police beat, a detective taught me this trick," he explained. "You keep watch while I work."

Now that Webb had disappeared no one was to be seen near the beach. To Penny's relief, not a person appeared, and Salt, working swiftly, soon had the door open.

To make certain they would not be taken unawares, Salt relocked the door on the inside. Groping about, he found the lantern Webb had left behind, and lighted it.

Three mines lay on the floor. "Which is the right one?" Penny asked. "They all look alike!"

"Mr. Johnson's initials must be on the one Webb tampered with."

Salt turned over one of the mines, inspecting it.

"That thing might go off any minute," Penny said, edging away. "Do be careful, Salt."

Salt chuckled. "If it should go off, we'd never know what hit us," he said. "This is the one Webb tampered with all right. Penny, how are you at forging?"

"Forging?" she repeated, not understanding what he meant.

"Can you duplicate Mr. Johnson's initials on another mine?"

"Oh, I don't think so. Not so it would look the same."

"Sure, you can," Salt said, thrusting his pocket knife into her hand. "It will be dark and no one will look too carefully."

"But why do you want me to do it? You mean to substitute Mr. Johnson's mine for one of the others?"

"That's the ticket," chuckled the photographer. "Maybe my guess is wrong, but I have a sneaking suspicion if we use one of the professor's own mines, it will fail to explode."

"The mine has to be doctored with that powder we saw Webb use!"

"That's my theory, Penny."

"But maybe the other mines have already been treated."

"That's a possibility," Salt admitted thoughtfully.



"No way of telling that, because the hole would be covered so skillfully. We'll have to take a chance on it."

While Salt held the lantern, Penny scratched Mr. Johnson's initials on the metal covering of the mine. Skilled in art, she was able to copy them fairly well.

"They don't look exactly the same," Salt said, comparing the two, "but they're good enough to get by unless Mr. Johnson becomes very critical."

Quickly they moved the two mines, placing Mr. Johnson's well to the back of the room, and leaving the substitute exactly where the other had been.

"Well, that job is done," Salt chuckled. "Unless I miss my guess—"

He broke off, startled to hear a murmur of voices from a short distance down the beach. Quick as a flash he blew out the lantern and hung it in its accustomed place on the wall nail.

"Salt! Those men are coming!" Penny whispered fearfully. "We're trapped here!"

It was too late to slip out the door, for already the men were very close, and unmistakably, one of the voices was that of Professor Bettenridge.

The only available hiding place was a storage closet. Barely in time, Salt and Penny squeezed into it, closing the door and flattening themselves against the wall.

The door of the shack swung open to admit the professor, Webb, and Mr. Johnson.

"Dark as pitch in here," Webb muttered. "Wait and I'll light the lantern."

In a moment the yellow glow illuminated the dingy little room.

"Which is my mine?" Mr. Johnson asked. "They all look alike."

"And for all practical purposes they are exactly alike," said the professor smoothly. "So far as my machine is concerned, it makes not a partical of difference. Webb, which is the mine that Mr. Johnson supplied?"

"Here it is," the assistant said, tapping the one Salt and Penny had substituted. "See your initials, Mr. Johnson?"

"Yes, yes," agreed the man.

Inside the closet, Penny and Salt breathed easier.

"Let's get on with the demonstration," the professor urged with sudden impatience. "Load the mine onto the boat, Webb. Go out to the center of the lake. Then when you have dropped it, give the usual signal."

"When everything is okay, I'll wave my lantern three times," Webb agreed.

The mine was trundled out and the shack became dark. However, Salt and Penny did not dare come out of hiding until they heard Webb start the motor of the boat.

"The coast is clear," the photographer then reported, peering out a crack of the outer door. "Webb has gone, and the professor and Mr. Johnson are walking up to the cabin."



From the beach, Penny and Salt watched the boat moving slowly across the water. Presently the craft stopped, and the mine was heaved overboard. The pair waited, but there was no signal from Webb. Nor did his boat move away from the locality where the mine had been dropped.

"Why doesn't he wave the lantern?" Penny fretted.

"He's waiting deliberately, and for a purpose," Salt declared. "Why not amble up the hill and watch the professor perform?"

"Not a bad idea," agreed Penny.

Walking rapidly, they arrived at the cabin quite breathless. As they tapped lightly on the door, Professor Bettenridge appeared visibly startled. He stiffened to alert, guarded attention, but relaxed slightly as his wife admitted the pair.

"Oh, it's you two again," he said none too pleasantly. "You are just in time to witness my final demonstration. We are waiting now for my assistant's signal."

"It seems to take a long while," Mr. Johnson commented, glancing at his watch.

"Webb may have had trouble getting the mine overboard," the professor soothed. "Besides, he has to move out of the danger zone."

Penny and Salt looked at each other but said nothing. They were certain that Webb had been in no haste to return to shore.

"What are you two smirking about?" the professor demanded irritably. "I suppose you think my machine won't work?"

"I'll be surprised if it does," Salt agreed, unruffled.

Mrs. Bettenridge, who stood at the window, suddenly cried: "There is the signal!"

Professor Bettenridge snapped on a switch and the ray machine began to hum. He turned on another motor and lights began to glow. Then he struck the crystal ball, producing a musical vibration.

Assuming a confident pose, he waited.

Nothing happened.

As the seconds ticked by and still there was no explosion, the professor began to wilt. He gazed desperately at his wife who looked as dismayed as he.

"My dear, something seems to be wrong. Are you sure you saw the signal? Perhaps Webb has not yet dropped the mine."

"I saw the signal. The lantern was waved three times."

The professor made several adjustments on his machine, and again struck the musical note. But there was no explosion. Enjoying his discomfiture, Salt and Penny grinned from ear to ear.

"You did something to the machine!" the professor



accused them furiously. "You came here and tampered!"

"We've not been near this place tonight until a moment ago," Penny retorted. "The truth is, you weren't able to explode Mr. Johnson's mine!"

"That's not so!" The professor's face now was red with anger. "Something has gone wrong, but that doesn't prove my machine is a failure. We'll have another test."

"I'm not sure that I shall be interested," Mr. Johnson said quietly. "I've been thinking the matter over and there are so many hazards—"

"I'll make you an especially good offer," the professor declared, flipping the canvas cover over his machine. "Furthermore, we will have the test tonight. I guarantee to explode the mine before you leave here."

"But the mine I supplied is at the bottom of the lake and it failed to go off," Mr. Johnson said.

"First, we will talk to Webb and learn exactly what happened," the professor said, taking him by the arm. "I know there is a logical explanation for the failure."

Glaring at Penny and Salt, he shooed everyone out of the cabin, locking the door.

"My dear," he said to his wife, giving her a significant look, "take Mr. Johnson to the house while I find Webb. I'll be with you in just a minute."

The professor went hurriedly down the beach while

Mrs. Bettenridge and Mr. Johnson walked slowly toward the rooming house. Penny and Salt remained beside the cabin until everyone was beyond hearing.

"Well, our trick worked," Salt chuckled, "but if we aren't careful, the professor will pull off a successful test yet and ruin all our plans."

"He and Webb are certain to examine the mines and discover the one with Mr. Johnson's initials still in the shack. Then they may convince Mr. Johnson there was a mix-up, and go ahead with another test which will be successful."

"We've got to do something," Salt muttered. "But what?"

"I know!" Penny exclaimed. "I'll telephone Dad and have him come here right away with Major Bryan!"

"Good!" approved Salt. "I'll stay here and hold the fort while you telephone. Tell your father to step on the gas, because we've got to move fast to queer Professor Bettenridge's game."

CHAPTER

# 20

## *A CROOK EXPOSED*

EAGER TO carry out Salt Sommers' bidding, Penny ran up the hill in search of a telephone. She considered using the one at the house where Professor and Mrs. Bettenridge roomed, but decided against it, fearing that the conversation might be overheard or reported to them by the farm woman.

Hastening on, she saw a light farther down the road, and recalled having noticed a house there. Five minutes later, completely winded, she pounded on the door. A man in shirtsleeves, the evening newspaper in his hand, answered her knock.

"Please, may I use your telephone?" Penny gasped.

"Why, sure," he agreed, stepping aside for her to enter. "Anything wrong?"

Penny knew better than to mention what was happening at the lake. "I want to telephone my father in Riverview," she explained.

"The phone is in the other room," the man said, switching on a light.

Placing the call, Penny waited impatiently for it to be put through. She was uncertain whether her father would be at home. If she failed to reach him, then the only other thing was to notify the sheriff.

"Here is your party. Go ahead, please," came the long distance operator's voice. The next moment Penny heard her father's clear tones at the other end of the line.

"Dad, I'm at Blue Hole Lake with Salt," she explained hurriedly. "Can you drive here right away?"

"I suppose so," he answered, knowing from her voice that something serious was wrong. "What's up?"

"We've learned plenty about Professor Bettenridge, Dad. Unless something is done quickly, he may sell his fake machine to Mr. Johnson."

"But what can *I* do about it?" the publisher asked.

"Can you get hold of the Major and bring him with you?" Penny pleaded. "Professor Bettenridge may be the man he's after!"

"Maybe I can reach him!" Mr. Parker agreed. "If I have luck I'll be out there within twenty or thirty minutes. I'll come as fast as I can."

Before hanging up the receiver, Penny gave her father detailed instructions for reaching the lake and told him where to park. Leaving a dollar bill to pay for the call, she then hastened back to find Salt.

The photographer was nowhere near the cabin and



she was afraid to call his name lest she be overheard by the Bettenridges.

As she stood in the shadow of the building, she heard voices from the beach. Someone with a lighted lantern was coming up the trail, and soon she distinguished two figures—Professor Bettenridge and Webb.

"That's the story you'll have to tell Johnson," she heard the professor say. "Tell him that somehow you got the two mines mixed up as you were loading them onto the boat and dumped one that was never meant to explode."

"But he saw us load the mine."

"It was dark and he may not be sure. Anyway, the mine with Johnson's initials is still in the shack. We'll show it to him."

"What bothers me is how did the mistake happen?" Webb muttered. "I know the mine I loaded on the boat had Johnson's initials. It should have gone off."

"Someone is onto our game, and tampered with the mines. It may have been a trick of that newspaper pair."

"In that case, we're in a dangerous spot. We ought to clear out while the clearing is good. If the authorities get onto what we're doing—"

"They won't—at least not tonight," the professor said confidently. "The sheriff is as dumb as they come, and is convinced I am a genius second only to Thomas Edison. We'll have to pull off a successful

test tonight with Johnson's mine, collect what we can, and clear out."

"Okay," Webb agreed, "but this is my last job. The game is too dangerous. I served one stretch in the pen and I don't look forward to another."

"If we can explode Johnson's mine tonight, we'll collect the money and be away from here as soon as we cash the check. Can you pull off the job without any blunder?"

"Sure I can unless someone tampers with the mine! This time I'll make sure they don't!"

"Okay," the professor agreed. "Now I want you to talk to Johnson. Put up a good story, and get him to look at the mine that has his initials on it. If he refuses, we're licked, but it's worth a final try."

"I'd like to find the guy who broke into the shack!" Webb muttered.

"We may have time for that later. Just now our most important job is to convince Johnson we have something to sell."

The two men now were very close. Penny flattened herself against the building wall, fearful of being seen. The light from their lantern illuminated her for an instant, but the men were so absorbed in their discussion, they failed to see her. Going on up the hillside path, they vanished into the farmhouse.

What had become of Salt, Penny did not know. Thinking he might have gone down to the lake, she



walked rapidly in that direction. As she approached the shack where the mines were stored, she heard a low whistle.

"Is that you, Salt?" she called softly.

He came from behind a clump of bushes to join her. Quickly they compared notes. Salt had overheard no conversation, but he had watched Professor Bettenridge and Webb as they reexamined the mines in the shack.

"They're onto our game, and it won't work twice," he said. "We've got to delay the test, but how?"

"Maybe we could cut the boat loose!"

"A capital idea!" Salt approved, chuckling. "Penny, you really have a brain!"

As they scurried over the stones to the water's edge, Penny suddenly stopped short.

"Listen!" she commanded.

"I didn't hear anything," Salt said.

"An automobile stopped by the roadside. I'm sure of it. Maybe it's my father!"

"He couldn't have reached here so soon."

"You don't know Dad," Penny chuckled. "He drives like the wind. It certainly sounded like the engine of our car."

"Let's have a look before we cut the boat loose," Salt said, slipping a knife back into his pocket.

"I'll go," Penny offered. "You wait here."

Before Salt could stop her, she darted away into the

darkness. Crawling under a barbed wire fence, she took a short cut to the road. Even before she saw the car, she heard a voice which she recognized as her father's.

"Dad!" she called softly.

He was with another man whom Penny hoped was Major Bryan. As the two came toward the fence, she saw that it was indeed the Army officer.

"Dad, how did you get here so quickly?" she greeted him. "Salt and I didn't expect you for at least another twenty minutes."

"I was lucky enough to get hold of Major Bryan right away," Mr. Parker answered, climbing over the fence. "Now I hope you haven't brought us on a wild chase, Penny. What's up?"

"Come with me and I'll show you," she offered. "That's easier than explaining everything."

Major Bryan, a well-built man of early middle age, asked Penny several questions about Professor Bettenridge as the three walked hurriedly toward the lake.

"From your description, he seems to be the man I'm after," he declared grimly. "If he's the same person, his real name is Claude Arkwright and he's wanted for impersonating an officer and on various other charges. He pulled a big job in New York three months ago, then vanished."

Salt was waiting at the lake. "What's our move?"



he asked, after relating everything that had occurred that night. "Shall we cut the boat loose?"

"First, let me examine those mines," the major requested. "Can we get into the shack?"

"I can pick the lock, but it takes time," Salt offered.

"We'll break it," the major decided. "Those men may return here at any minute, so there's no time to lose."

The door was forced open and Penny was placed on guard to watch the hillside for Webb or anyone in the professor's party.

There was no light in the shack, but both Mr. Parker and the major had brought flashlights. Salt pointed out the mine which had been doctored by Webb. Carefully, the Army officer examined it.

"I can't tell much by looking at it for the work has been cleverly concealed," he admitted. "But from what you've told me, I am quite certain how the mine is made to explode."

"How is it done?" Salt demanded.

"After the hole is made, a chemical—probably sodium—is inserted. Then another substance which melts slowly in water is used to seal up the opening."

"Then that explains why Webb delayed so long in giving the signal after the mine had been dropped into the water!" Penny exclaimed from the doorway. "He was waiting for the substance to melt!"

"Exactly," agreed the major. "If my theory is correct, only the action of water is required to explode this mine. The professor's machine, of course, has nothing whatsoever to do with it."

"Why don't we explode the mine now?" Penny suddenly proposed. "That would put an end to the professor's little scheme."

"It might also prevent us from arresting him," the major said. He debated a moment. Then he exclaimed: "It's worth trying! We'll load the mine on the boat and dump 'er in the lake!"

The men would not permit Penny to help with the dangerous work. Carefully they transported the mine to the boat. Salt was about to start the motor, but the major stopped him.

"No, we don't want the sound of the engine to give us away," he said. "We'll row out into the lake."

Penny was eager to accompany the men, but they would not hear of it. To her disappointment, she was compelled to remain on the beach.

Sitting down on the sand, she nervously watched until the boat faded into the black of the night. Presently, she heard a splash which told her that the mine had been lowered overboard. Anxiously, she waited for the boat to return.

"Why don't they come?" she thought, straining to hear the sound of oars. "If the explosion should go off while they're still out there—"



Then she heard the boat coming and breathed in relief. Soon the craft grated on sand, and the three men leaped out.

"Perhaps my theory is wrong," the major commented, as they all huddled together, waiting. "The mine should have gone off by this time."

Several minutes elapsed and still nothing happened. And then, as the group became convinced their plan had failed, there came a terrific explosion which sent flame and water high above the lake's surface.

CHAPTER

# 21

## *IN SEARCH OF WEBB*

"BEAUTIFUL! BEAUTIFUL!" chuckled the major as the flames began to die away. "That proves our theory. No machine is required to set off the mines—only the action of water."

"Professor Bettenridge must have heard the explosion!" Penny exclaimed, fairly beside herself with excitement. "What will happen now?"

"If human nature runs true to form, he will soon come here to investigate," the major predicted.

The four stepped back into the dense growth of trees to wait. Within five minutes they observed two shadowy figures scurrying down the path toward the shack where the mines were stored. As they came closer, Penny recognized the professor and his wife.

"And someone is following them," she discerned. "It looks like Mr. Johnson."

Professor Bettenridge and his wife now were near





the trees. Their voices, though low, carried to those in hiding.

"That stupid lout, Webb!" the professor muttered. "He has ruined everything now by setting off the mine too soon."

"But how could it have been Webb?" his wife protested. "He was at the farmhouse only five minutes ago. He wouldn't have had time."

"Then it was someone else—" Professor Bettenridge paused, and cast a quick alert glance about the lake shore. He noted that the boat was tied, but that the door of the shack was wide open.

"We've been exposed!" he muttered. "Our game is up, and we've got to get away from here before the authorities arrest us."

"But what about Johnson?" his wife demanded, glancing over her shoulder at the man who was following them down the hillside path.

"We can do nothing now. He had begun to catch on even before tonight, and this explosion finishes everything. Don't even stop to pack your clothes. We'll get our car and clear out."

"Webb?"

"He'll have to look out for himself. We're traveling alone and traveling fast."

Those in hiding suddenly stepped forth from the trees, blocking the path. Major Bryan moved directly in front of the professor, flashing a light into his face.

"Good evening, Claude Arkwright," he said distinctly.

The professor was startled, but recovered poise quickly. "You are mistaken," he said in a cold voice. "My name is Bettenridge."

"No doubt that is what you call yourself now. You are wanted by the Federal government for impersonating an officer."

"Ridiculous!"

"May I see your draft card?" the major requested curtly.

"Sorry, I haven't it with me. It is in my room."

"Then we will go there."

Nettled, Professor Bettenridge could think of no further excuse. Glancing significantly at his wife, he said: "My dear, will you go to the house and get the card for our inquisitors?"

"We will all go," corrected the major. "Your wife may be wanted as your accomplice in this latest secret ray machine fleece. We prefer that she does not escape."

"You are very trusting," sneered the professor.

By this time, Mr. Johnson had reached the hillside. Puffing from having hurried so fast, he gazed in bewilderment at the little group.

"What does this mean?" he inquired. "What caused the mine to explode?"



"It was set off by being dropped in the lake," explained the major.

"You mean the explosion was not touched off by Professor Bettenridge's invention?"

"The machine had nothing whatsoever to do with it," Penny explained. "Professor Bettenridge and his accomplice, Webb Nelson, have been doctoring the mines with a powder and an outer shield which dissolves in water. They hoped to sell the worthless machine to you before you discovered the truth."

The information stunned Mr. Johnson, but recovering, he turned furiously upon Professor Bettenridge.

"You cheap trickster!" he shouted. "I'll have you arrested for this!"

"Have you given the man any money?" Mr. Parker inquired.

"A thousand dollars for an option on the machine. The rest was to have been paid tonight."

"You're lucky to get off so easily," Mr. Parker said. "It's possible too, that we can get part of your deposit back."

"You can't hold me on any trumped-up charge," Professor Bettenridge said angrily. "You have no warrant."

He started away, but was brought up short as he felt the major's revolver pressing against his ribs.

"This will hold you, I think," said the Army man

coolly. "Now lead the way up the hill to the other cabin. I want to see your remarkable invention."

With his wife clinging to his arm, the professor marched stiffly ahead of the group. He unlocked the cabin door and all went inside.

Jerking off the canvas which covered the secret ray machine, Major Bryan inspected it briefly.

"A worthless contraption!" he said contemptuously. "Utterly useless!"

"Where did you meet Webb Nelson?" Penny asked the professor. "And where is he now?"

"You'll have to find him for yourself," sneered the professor. "If he has the sense I think, he's probably miles away from here by now."

Determined that the man should not escape, Penny, Salt and Mr. Parker started for the farmhouse, leaving the major and Mr. Johnson to question the professor. As they rapped on the screen door, Mrs. Leonard came to let them in.

"What is going on here tonight, may I ask?" she demanded irritably. "People banging in and out of the house at all hours! Explosions! I declare, I wish I never had rented a room to that crazy professor and his wife!"

"Is Webb Nelson here?" Mr. Parker asked.

"The professor's helper? Why, no, right after the explosion he came, gathered a bag of things from the professor's room, and went off down the road."



"In a car?"

"He was afoot when he left here. Is anything wrong?"

"Considerable. Professor Bettenridge has just been exposed as an impostor. Webb must have realized the jig was up when he heard the mine go off."

"The professor an impostor!" Mrs. Leonard exclaimed. "Well, of all things!"

"Which way did Webb go?" Mr. Parker asked.

"Down the road toward town when I last saw him."

"Maybe we can catch him!" Mr. Parker cried.

"If he didn't get a lift," Salt added.

All piled into the Parker car which had been left a short distance down the road. But in the drive to Newhall, the man was not sighted. Nor did inquiry in the town reveal anyone who had seen him.

"Undoubtedly he expected to be followed, and cut across the fields or took a side road," Mr. Parker declared. "We'll have to depend upon the authorities to pick him up now."

Stopping at the sheriff's office, warrants for the man's arrest were sworn out, and the party then returned to Mrs. Leonard's. Professor Bettenridge and his wife had been brought to the farmhouse by Major Bryan who proposed to hold them there pending the arrival of federal authorities from Riverview.

"There's one thing I want to know," Penny whispered to her father. "How did Professor Bettenridge

meet Webb? Perhaps he can explain the man's connection with the *Snark*."

The question was put to the professor who replied briefly that he knew nothing whatsoever about Webb Nelson.

"I met him only two weeks ago," he said. "He claimed to be an expert at handling explosives, so I hired him."

No one believed the professor was telling the truth. However, it was useless to question him further. Determined not to implicate himself, his wife, or his helper, he spoke as seldom as possible.

"The man has a room here," Mr. Parker suggested. "Suppose we see what we can find."

Mrs. Leonard led the way upstairs. The professor's room was locked, but she opened it with a master key.

Two suitcases had been packed as if for a hasty departure and everything was in disorder. All garments had been removed from the closets. The scrap basket was filled with torn letters which Mr. Parker promptly gathered together and placed in an envelope for future piecing together.

In one of the suitcases he found several newspaper clippings. One bore a picture of the professor, but the name beneath it was Claude Arkwright, and the story related that he was wanted in connection with a $10,-000 hoax.



"Bettenridge is our man all right," the publisher declared. "We made no mistake in holding him for the sheriff."

Penny had been searching the larger of the two suitcases which seemed to contain only clothing. But as she reached the lower layer, she suddenly gave a jubilant cry.

"Salt! Dad!" she exclaimed. "It's here! See what I've found!"

CHAPTER

# 22

# *SALT'S MISSING CAMERA*

FROM THE suitcase, Penny lifted Salt's camera. With a cry of pleasure, he snatched it from her hand and eagerly examined it.

"Is it damaged in any way?" Penny asked.

"It doesn't seem to be. So the professor had it all the time just as we thought!"

"And here are the plates I tossed into the car the night of the explosion!" Penny added, burrowing deeper into the pile of clothing. "They're probably ruined by now."

"Maybe not," said Salt, examining them. "The professor may have thought they were unexposed plates and kept them for use later on."

"Anyway, it was crooked of him to try to keep the camera," Penny declared. "Though I suppose such a small theft doesn't amount to much in comparison to the trick he nearly played on Mr. Johnson."

"It matters to me," the photographer chuckled. "Am





I glad to get this camera back! The plates won't do us any good now they are outdated, but I'll take them along anyhow. I'm curious to see if they would have shown anything of significance."

"By all means develop them," urged Mr. Parker. "Anything else in the suitcase?"

In a pocket of the case Penny found several letters from Mr. Johnson which she gave to her father. Knowing they would be valuable in establishing a case of attempted fraud against the professor, he kept them.

"I wish Webb Nelson hadn't managed to escape," Penny remarked as the trio went downstairs again. "He must have started for Newhall, perhaps to catch a train."

"Any due at this time?" her father asked thoughtfully.

"I wouldn't know."

"Tell you what," Mr. Parker proposed. "We can do nothing more here. We may as well drive to the village again and press an inquiry for Webb."

Once more the car with Salt as driver careened over the bumpy country road to Newhall. They reached the town without sighting anyone who resembled the professor's helper.

"Drive to the station," Mr. Parker instructed Salt. "There's an outside chance Webb went there."

The depot was a drab little red building, deserted except for a sleepy-eyed station agent who told them

there was no passenger train scheduled to leave Newhall before six o'clock the next morning.

"Any freight trains?" Mr. Parker inquired.

"A couple are overdue," the agent said. "No. 32 from the east, and No. 20, also westbound. No. 20's just coming into the block."

Although it seemed unlikely Webb would take a freight train out of town, Mr. Parker, Salt and Penny, decided to wait for it to come in. They went outside, standing in the shadow of the station.

"No sign of anyone around," Salt declared, looking carefully about. "We may as well go back to the lake."

"Let's wait," Penny urged.

No. 20 rumbled into the station, stirring up a whirlwind of dust and cinders. A trainman with a lantern over his arm, came into the station to get his orders from the agent. He chatted a moment, then went out again, swinging aboard one of the cars. A moment later, the train began to move.

"Shall we go?" Mr. Parker said impatiently.

Penny buttoned her coat as she stepped beyond the protection of the building, for the night air was cold and penetrated her thin clothing. Treading along behind her father and Salt to the car, she started to climb in, when her attention riveted upon a lone figure some distance from the railroad station. A man, who resembled Webb Nelson in build, had emerged from behind a tool shed, and stood close to the tracks watching the slowly moving freight.



Then he ran along beside the train and suddenly leaped into one of the empty box cars.

"Dad! Salt!" she exclaimed. "I just saw someone leap into one of those cars! I'm sure it was Webb!"

"Where?" demanded her father. "Which car?"

"The yellow one. Oh, he'll get away unless we can have him arrested at the next town!"

"He won't escape if I can stop him!" Salt muttered.

Racing across the platform, he waited for the car Penny had indicated. Although the train was moving faster now, he leaped and swung himself to a sitting position in the open doorway.

"Look out! Look out!" Penny screamed in warning.

Behind Salt, the man who had taken refuge in the car, moved stealthily toward him, obviously intending to push him off the train. But the photographer knew what to expect and was prepared.

He whirled suddenly and scrambled to his feet. His attacker caught him slightly off balance, and they went down together, rolling over and over on the straw littered floor.

Worried for Salt, Penny and Mr. Parker ran along beside the train. The publisher tried to leap aboard

to help the photographer, but lacking the younger man's athletic prowess, he could not make it. Already winded, he began to fall behind.

Penny kept on and managed to grasp the doorway of the car, but she instantly realized she could not swing herself through the opening. The train now was moving rapidly and gaining speed each moment.

Inside the box car, the two men were rolling over and over, each fighting desperately to gain the advantage. Penny could not see what was happening. Forced by the speed of the train, she let go her hold. Her feet were swept from beneath her, and she stumbled and fell along the right of way.

Before she could scramble to her feet, her father had caught up with her.

"Are you hurt?" he asked anxiously.

Penny's knees were skinned but the injury was so trifling she did not speak of it. Her one concern was for Salt.

"Oh, Dad," she said, grasping his arm nervously. "What are we going to do? That brute may kill him!"

Mr. Parker shared Penny's concern, but he said calmly: "There's only one thing we can do now. We'll have the station agent send a wire to the next station. Police will meet the train and take Webb into custody."

"He may not be on the train by the time it reaches



the next town! Oh, Dad, Salt may be half killed before then!"

Penny and her father stared after the departing freight. The engineer whistled for a high trestle spanning a narrow river, and the train began to rumble over it.

Suddenly Penny stiffened into alert attention. In the doorway of the open boxcar, she could see the two struggling men. Mr. Parker, too, became tense.

As they watched fearfully, one of the men was pushed from the car. He rolled over and over down a steep embankment toward the creek bed.

The other man, poised in the doorway an instant, then just before the car reached the trestle, leaped.

CHAPTER

# 23

# *ESCAPE BY NIGHT*

FEARFUL FOR Salt, Penny and her father ran down the tracks toward the railroad trestle. Scrambling and sliding down the slippery embankment, they saw Salt lying in a heap near the edge of the creek.

Webb, his ankle injured, was trying to hobble toward a corn field just beyond the railroad right of way.

"Get him! Don't let him escape!" Salt cried, raising himself to his knees.

Although alarmed for the photographer who appeared to have been injured by his leap, Penny and her father pursued Webb. Handicapped as he was with an injured ankle, they overtook him by the barbed wire fence.

Already badly battered from the fight, and bruised as a result of his fall from the train, the man put up only a brief struggle as Mr. Parker pinned him to the ground.





"Quick!" the publisher directed Penny. "See what you can do for Salt. He may be badly injured."

The photographer, however, had struggled to his feet. He stood unsteadily, staring down at his torn clothing.

"Are you all right?" Penny asked anxiously, running to his side.

"Yes, I'm okay," he said, gingerly touching a bruised jaw. "Boy! Is that lad a scrapper? Did you see me push him out of the boxcar?"

"We certainly did, and we were frightened half to death! We thought you would be killed."

Hobbling over to the fence, Salt confronted his assailant. Webb's face was a sorry sight. His nose was crimson, both eyes were blackened and his lip was bleeding.

"You may as well come along without making any more trouble," Mr. Parker told him grimly. "Professor Bettenridge has been taken into custody, and the entire fraud has been exposed."

"I figured that out when I heard the mine go off," the man returned sullenly. "Okay, you got me, but I was only carrying out orders. I worked for Professor Bettenridge, but any deals he made were his business, not mine."

"That remains to be seen," replied Mr. Parker. "We'll let you talk to the sheriff. Move along, and no monkey business."

Having no weapon, Salt and the publisher walked on either side of the prisoner, while Penny brought up the rear.

"You don't need to hang onto me," he complained bitterly. "I ain't going to try to escape."

"We're sure you won't," returned Salt, "because we'll be watching you every step of the way."

At first, as the four tramped down the tracks toward the station, the prisoner showed no disposition to talk. But gradually his curiosity gained the better of him. He sought information about Professor Bettenridge's arrest, and then tried to build up a story that would convince his captors he had only been an employee hired on a weekly basis.

"I suppose you know nothing about the *Snark* either," Penny observed bitterly. "After Ben Bartell and I pulled you out of the river, you repaid us by stealing his watch."

To her astonishment, the man reached in his pocket and gave her the timepiece.

"Here," he said gruffly, "give it back to him. I won't need it where I'm going."

"Why did you take the watch when it didn't belong to you?" Penny pursued the subject. "Especially after Ben risked his life to pull you out of the river."

"Oh, I don't know," the man answered impatiently. "I needed a watch, so I took it. Quit askin' so many questions."



"Why were you pushed off the *Snark?*" Penny demanded, refusing to abandon the subject.

She did not expect Webb to answer the question as he had refused to explain at the time of his rescue. To her surprise, he replied grimly:

"They tried to get rid of me. We had a disagreement over a job they wanted me to pull."

"What job was that?" Mr. Parker interposed.

"Dynamiting the Conway Steel Plant."

The words produced a powerful effect upon the publisher, Salt, and Penny. At their stunned silence, Webb added hastily:

"You understand, I didn't do it. They got sore because I refused to pull the job."

"Why, that doesn't make sense," Penny protested. "Evidently, you are mixed up on your dates, because the Conway Plant explosion took place before the night we rescued you from the water."

"Sure, I know," the man muttered, trying to cover his slip of tongue. "They were afraid I'd squawk to the police and that was why they pitched me overboard."

"Who pulled the job?" Salt asked.

"I don't know. Someone was hired to set off the explosion."

Webb's story was accepted but not believed. Penny knew from previous experience that the man was more inclined to tell a lie than the truth. Con-

vinced that he might have been implicated in the explosion, she suddenly recalled his visit to the office of Jason Cordell. Could his call there have any hidden significance?

"You're a friend of Mr. Cordell's, aren't you?" she inquired abruptly.

The question caught Webb off guard. He gave her a quick look but answered in an indifferent way: "Never heard of him."

"I'm certain I saw you in his office," Penny insisted.

Realizing that his loose talk was building up trouble for himself, Webb would say no more. At the sheriff's office, he repeated practically the same story, insisting that he had been hired by Professor Bettenridge on a wage basis, and that he was in no way implicated in the plot to defraud Mr. Johnson.

"Your story doesn't hang together," Mr. Parker said severely. "Naturally you knew that the professor's machine was worthless?"

"Not at first," Webb whined. "He only told me he wanted a mine exploded at a certain time. It was only by chance that I learned he intended to cheat Mr. Johnson."

"Considering the conversations I overheard between you and the professor, that is a little hard to believe," Penny contributed.

"It might go a little easier with you, if you come through with the truth," a deputy sheriff in charge of



the office, added. "Anything you want to say before we lock you up?"

Webb hesitated a long while, and then in a subdued voice said: "Okay, I may as well tell you. Sure, I knew the professor and his wife were crooks. They offered me a split on the profits if Johnson bought the secret ray machine."

"Where did you obtain your mines?" Salt asked curiously.

"I don't know," Webb answered, and for once spoke the truth. "Professor Bettenridge had a friend hooked up in a munitions plant who supplied him with a few which were defective."

"Now tell us the truth about the *Snark*," Penny insisted. "You said those men were mixed up in the dynamiting of the Conway Steel Plant. Was that one of the professor's jobs?"

"No, he had nothing to do with it."

"His car was in the vicinity of the plant on the night of the explosion."

"It was just accident then," Webb maintained. "He had nothing to do with it."

"Then you do know the persons involved?"

"If I told you, you wouldn't believe me," Webb said sullenly. "Why not go to the *Snark* and get information first hand if you want it."

It was evident the man would reveal no more, so the deputy sheriff locked him up. Within a few

minutes Professor Bettenridge and his wife were brought in, and although they indignantly demanded release, they too were placed in jail cells.

Mr. Johnson who had accompanied Major Bryan to the sheriff's office, seemed rather stunned by the events which had transpired. He shook Penny's hand and could not praise her enough for exposing the professor's trickery.

"What a fool I was," he acknowledged. "His smooth talk hypnotized me. Why, I might have paid a large sum of money to him, if it hadn't been for you. Now I shall prosecute charges vigorously."

The wealthy man tried to press money upon both Penny and Salt, who smilingly refused to accept it. They assured him that knowing the professor's trick had failed was ample reward.

By the time Penny, her father and Salt finally reached the Parker home it was nearly midnight. Somewhat to their surprise, Mrs. Weems was still waiting up.

"I'm so glad you came!" she exclaimed, before they could explain what had happened. "Nearly an hour ago someone telephoned, asking for Penny. I think the message may be important."

"Who was it?" Penny asked.

"A man named Edward McClusky."

"The river diver!" Penny exclaimed. "What did he want, Mrs. Weems?"



"At first he wouldn't tell me, saying he had to talk to you personally. However, I finally persuaded him to trust me with the message. He said: 'Tell Miss Parker that her friend Ben Bartell went aboard the *Snark* last night and hasn't been seen since.' "

CHAPTER

# 24

# *A RAID ON THE* SNARK

"OH, WHY didn't Mr. McClusky call the police instead?" Penny cried anxiously. "Ben may be in serious trouble!" Turning to her father she added: "Dad, we must go there right away!"

"To the *Snark?*" Mr. Parker frowned and reached for the telephone. "The matter is one for the police, Penny. I'll call the night inspector."

Contacting the police station, the publisher explained why he believed it advisable to search the *Snark*. He was assured that a squad would be sent there at once to investigate.

"We've had other complaints about that vessel," the inspector said. "So far we've not been able to find anything out of the way."

Having notified the police, Mr. Parker felt that his duty was done, but not Penny.

"Dad, can't we go there too?" she pleaded. "Ben is in trouble and we may be able to help him."





"I don't see what we could do, Penny. Besides, you know how I feel about Ben."

"And you're dead wrong. You've done him a dreadful injustice. Tonight may prove it."

Mr. Parker wavered, then suddenly gave in. "All right, get your heavy coat," he instructed. "It will be cold along the waterfront."

Penny raced for the warm garment and joined her father and Salt as they were backing the press car out of the driveway.

"The *Snark* is tied up at Pier 23," Penny directed. "Straight down this street and turn at Jackson."

The car reached the docks, parking alongside a dark warehouse. There was no sign of the police. A short distance away, the *Snark* with only dim deck lights showing, and no one in view, tugged at her heavy ropes.

"We'll wait for the police," Mr. Parker decided.

Within five minutes, two cars glided noiselessly up to the pier and a dozen men in uniform leaped out. Captain Bricker, in charge of the squad, strode to the *Snark* and called loudly: "Ahoy, there!"

No one answered.

"Ahoy, the *Snark!*" he shouted again.

Still receiving no answer, he ordered his men aboard. Single file, they crawled cautiously up a ladder to the dark deck.

"Anyone aboard?" the captain called once more.

Salt, Mr. Parker and Penny, eager for first hand information, followed the policemen up the ladder.

"My men will search the vessel," Captain Bricker told them, "but no one appears to be aboard. Everything seems in order."

Spreading out over the ship, the policemen returned one by one to report they could find nothing amiss. Not even a watchman was aboard.

"This seems to be a wild-goose chase, Captain," Mr. Parker apologized. "Sorry to have bothered you. We considered our information reliable."

The policemen began to leave. Penny, lingering on deck until the last, was being helped onto the ladder by Captain Bricker, when they both heard a sound below decks.

"What was that?" the officer muttered, listening alertly.

"It sounded like someone thumping on a wall," Penny cried. "There it is again!"

The noise was not repeated a third time, but Captain Bricker had heard enough to make him believe that someone remained below. Drawing his revolver, and warning Penny to keep back, he started down the dark companionway.

At a safe distance, Penny trailed him. His bright flashlight beam cut paths of light over the walls as he tried the doors.

"Anyone here?" he shouted.



A thumping noise came from a room on the right. Guided by the sound, Captain Bricker tried the door. It was locked.

A powerfully built man, the officer hurled his weight against the door, and the lock gave way. Keeping back, lest he become a target for a bullet, he kicked the door open. The room was empty! But, the flashlight beam caught the outline of a trapdoor in the floor. The officer flung it open. Below, in the hold, lay a man gagged and bound hand and foot.

Following the police officer into the room, Penny uttered a little cry as she recognized Ben Bartell. Blinking owlishly in the light which had been focused upon him, he was a deplorable sight. His face was bruised, his hair matted with blood, and one eye was swollen almost shut.

"Oh, Ben! What have they done to you?" Penny gasped in horror.

Captain Bricker cut the young man free, and pulled the gag from his mouth. He helped Ben into a chair and then went to another cabin for water.

"Who did this to you?" Penny asked, rubbing the reporter's hands to restore circulation.

He seemed too exhausted to reply so she did not urge him to speak. The captain brought water which Ben drank thirstily.

"He's evidently been tied up several hours," the officer commented.

"Since last night," Ben whispered, moistening his cracked lips.

"How did you get aboard?"

"I sneaked on when no one was looking—wanted to see what I could learn."

"Who were the men that tied you up?"

"Don't know. But before they caught me, I heard plenty. The men on this boat are mixed up in the dynamiting of the Conway Steel Plant."

Penny nodded, for this information correlated with what she already had learned.

"Was Webb Nelson involved in the plot?" she asked eagerly.

"He set off the dynamite according to what I overheard last night," Ben revealed. "But he got into a fight with the gang over his pay for the job. He tried to shake them down for a big sum, threatening to spill everything to the police if they didn't cough up. It ended up in a fight, and Webb was pushed overboard."

"Then we pulled him out of the river," Penny supplied. "But he refused to tell us a thing."

"He knew better than to spill the story because he would have implicated himself. And the gang aboard this boat had no fear either, because they figured he was only pulling a bluff."

"But who was behind the plot?" Penny asked, puzzled. "What did the men hope to gain by dynamiting the plant?"



"They did it on orders from a man higher up—a man who personally hates the owner of the Conway Steel Plant."

"Then it was a grudge matter?" Captain Bricker inquired dubiously.

"Not entirely," Ben returned. "Labor troubles are mixed up in it. This man, who represents a minor faction, has been trying to gain control over the employes without much success. By planning a series of accidents similar to the dynamiting, he thought he might bring the management around to his way of thinking."

"Who is the leader?" Penny demanded impatiently.

Ben hesitated. "I hate to say," he confessed, "because I'm not absolutely certain. In the conversation I overheard before I was caught, he wasn't mentioned by name. But by putting two and two together, I have a fairly good idea."

"Guessing won't do in this business," said Captain Bricker.

"I know that," admitted Ben. "But here is one bit of fact I gained. The big boss was at the factory on the night of the explosion. In fact, he was nearly caught, and a photographer snapped a picture of him as he fled."

"You're sure of that?" Penny demanded excitedly.

"Yes, I heard the men talking about it. The boss has been worried for fear that picture will show up and convict him."

"Now I'm beginning to understand," Penny murmured. "It explains why the *Star* photography room was broken into several times. Someone was after those plates which weren't there!"

"What became of the pictures?" Captain Bricker asked. "They'll prove valuable evidence."

"Why, Salt Sommers has the camera and plates in the press car. Of course, we don't know what the plates will show until they're developed."

"We must have them at once," the captain said. He turned again to Ben. "Now did you know any of the men who attacked you?"

"Not a one. But I can give you a fairly good description of most of them. They're waterfront riffraff."

"In that case some of them may have their pictures in our files," the captain said. "I'll issue orders to round up all loiterers in this neighborhood. You should be able to identify most of them in a police line-up."

"I'm sure I can."

"Now about the higher-up who engineered the scheme. You said you had an idea who he is."

"That's right," agreed Ben. "The men spoke of him as a publisher. I don't like to accuse him outright, because I'll be suspected of trying to get even with a man I hate."



Light came swiftly to Penny. Into her mind leaped many facts hitherto puzzling, but which now seemed suddenly clear. The open skylight—the building adjoining the *Star*—Webb Nelson's call upon the editor of the *Mirror*.

"Ben, you don't need to accuse anyone!" she cried. "I'll do it myself. The man is Jason Cordell, and I think we can prove it too!"

CHAPTER

# 25

## *PICTURE PROOF*

"YES, JASON CORDELL is the man responsible," Ben agreed soberly. "I can't prove it, but in my own mind I'm sure."

"You used to work for him, didn't you?" the police captain inquired, the inflection of his voice implying that he thought the former reporter might be prejudiced.

"I was fired," Ben admitted readily. "Cordell let me go and blacklisted me everywhere to prevent me from exposing him. He wanted to discredit me, so that anything I might say would carry no weight."

"Why were you really discharged, Ben?" Penny asked. "What did you learn about Mr. Cordell?"

"That he had pulled off no end of crooked deals and that he was mixed up with this outlaw labor group. Over a period of three or four years, Cordell has made a mint of money, and not from his paper either!"





"We'll question Cordell tonight," Captain Bricker promised. "The trick now is to get you to the station for first aid treatment. Then we'll want you to look through the police morgue and identify the pictures of as many of the *Snark's* crew as you can."

The officer turned to Penny. "As for those undeveloped plates, can you get them right away?"

"I think so," Penny returned. While Captain Bricker helped Ben up the companionway, she ran ahead to find her father and Salt and tell them of the latest developments.

The two were waiting in the press car. But when Mr. Parker learned how significant the pictures of the Conway Plant explosion might prove to be, he surprised Penny by declining to turn them over immediately to the police.

"We may want those plates for the *Star*," he declared. "If the police once get their hands on them, it might be a job to get them back again in time to be of any use to us."

"But Jason Cordell's arrest may depend upon them," Penny protested.

"We'll have the plates developed, and let police see them," Mr. Parker decided. "But the plates must remain in our hands. Come on, let's go!"

At a nod from the publisher, Salt started the press car, and without being instructed, headed for the *Star* building.

"How long will it take you to develop those plates?" Mr. Parker asked the photographer.

"Ten minutes."

"Good!" approved the publisher. "If they reveal anything, we'll telephone the police station at once."

As the car coasted to a standstill alongside the *Star* building, Penny's gaze roved to the darkened offices next door. All of the floors save one were without light. But in the suite occupied by the *Mirror*, a man plainly could be seen moving to and fro.

"There is Jason Cordell now!" she drew attention to him. "Why do you suppose he's at his office so late tonight?"

"There's no crime in that," replied Mr. Parker. "He may be guilty as Ben says, but I'll not believe it until I have the proof."

Letting themselves into the newspaper building, the three went up the back stairs to the photography studio. Salt immediately set about developing the plates.

"Something is coming up all right!" he declared jubilantly, as he rocked the developer tray back and forth.

In a few minutes, Salt had washed the plates and was able to examine them beneath the red light. One was blurred and revealed little. But the other plainly showed a man fleeing toward a waiting car.



"Why, the man is Webb Nelson!" Penny exclaimed, recognizing him.

"But notice the driver of the car," Salt said. "It's Jason Cordell! Ben was right."

"Then the man is guilty!" Penny cried. "Oh, Dad, I was certain of it!"

Mr. Parker scanned the plate carefully to ascertain there was no possible mistake.

"Yes, it's Jason Cordell," he agreed. "The truth is hard to believe. Why, I lunched with him only yesterday—"

"Dad, he's a criminal no matter how respectable he has acted."

"You're right," acknowledged Mr. Parker. "I'll notify the police at once and have him picked up for questioning."

Transmitting the important information to police headquarters, Mr. Parker talked with Captain Bricker who promised to take personal charge of the matter. As the publisher hung up the receiver, he was startled to have Penny grasp his arm. Excitedly, she pointed out the window.

"Now what?" he asked, failing to understand.

"The light just went off in Mr. Cordell's office! He's leaving!"

"Then we'll stop him," her father decided. "Salt, you stay here and rush that plate through! I'll detain

Cordell by one means or another until the police arrive!"

With Penny close beside him, he ran down the back stairs to the street. Breathlessly they arrived at the next building. The elevator was not running, but they could hear someone coming down the stairway. Then Jason Cordell, a brief case tucked under his arm, came into view. He stopped short upon seeing Mr. Parker and his daughter.

"Working late?" Mr. Parker inquired pleasantly.

"That's right," agreed the other. He would have walked on, but the publisher barred the exit.

"By the way, I met a friend of yours tonight," Mr. Parker said, stalling for time.

"That so? Who was he?"

"Webb Nelson."

Mr. Cordell's face did not change expression, but his eyes narrowed guardedly.

"Not a friend of mine," he corrected carelessly.

"But I've seen him in your office," Penny said.

Mr. Cordell looked her straight in the eyes and smiled as if in amusement. "That may be," he admitted, "but all who come to my office are not my friends."

He tried to pass again, but Mr. Parker stood his ground. "Say, what is this?" Mr. Cordell demanded, suddenly suspicious.

"I'm afraid I'll have to ask you a few questions about your friend Webb Nelson. Suppose we go back to your office."



"Suppose we don't," Cordell retorted. "I'm tired and I'm going home. If you want to see me, come around tomorrow during business hours."

"Which may be too late."

"I don't know what you're talking about," the *Mirror* editor blustered. "Furthermore, I'm not interested. Get out of my way."

Instead, Mr. Parker grasped him firmly by the arm. Cordell tried to jerk free, and in so doing, dropped his brief case, which Penny promptly seized.

"Give that to me!" the man shouted furiously.

Penny smiled, for through the plate glass window she had observed the approach of a police car. Another moment and uniformed men were swarming about Mr. Cordell.

"What is the meaning of this?" the man demanded angrily. "I'll report you all to the Safety Director who is my friend!"

"You'll report to him all right," agreed Captain Bricker. "Now come along quietly. If you can answer a few questions satisfactorily, you'll be allowed to return home."

"What do you want to know?" Cordell asked sullenly.

"Where were you on the night of the 16th?"

"Now how should I know?" the man retorted sar-

castically. "I can't remember that far back. But probably I was home in bed."

"You're wanted in connection with the Conway dynamiting," the officer informed him.

Mr. Cordell snorted with anger. "Of all the ridiculous charges! I know nothing about the affair."

Out of the door burst Salt Sommers. He was without a hat, but he carried a picture, still wet, in the palm of his hand.

"So you know nothing about the dynamiting," he mimicked. "Well, gentlemen, take a look at this!"

Mr. Cordell and the policemen gathered about him, studying the photograph. Plainly it showed Webb Nelson fleeing toward a car driven by the *Mirror* editor.

"What does this prove?" the man blustered. "I admit the car is mine. I was driving past the plant at the time of the explosion. This fellow, Nelson, leaped into my auto and ordered me to drive on."

"A moment ago you claimed you weren't even near the Conway Plant," Penny tripped him. "You knew Webb Nelson very well. Furthermore, you entered the *Star* offices several times trying to get your hands on this picture!"

"Ridiculous!"

"At least once when you found the stairway door locked, you went in through the skylight," Penny accused.



"Of all the crazy ideas!" The editor laughed jeeringly. "Imagine me crawling through a skylight!"

"I notice your coat has a torn place," Penny said, taking a scrap of blue wool from her purse. "This, I believe, is a perfect match."

Mr. Cordell gazed at the wool and shrugged. "All right," he admitted coolly. "I did crawl through the skylight twice to see if I could find the picture. I knew this fool photographer had snapped a picture of me, and I feared I might be falsely accused."

"Then you knew Nelson was mixed up in the dynamiting?" Captain Bricker questioned.

"I wasn't certain," Mr. Cordell said in confusion. "The reason I didn't report to the police was that I was afraid of being involved. After that night, Webb Nelson tried to blackmail me. Because of my position, I dared have no publicity."

The *Mirror* editor's explanation carried a certain amount of conviction, and Penny was dismayed to hear Captain Bricker assure him that if a mistake had been made he would be granted freedom immediately after he had talked to the police chief.

"I shall accompany you without protest," the *Mirror* editor returned stiffly. "Later I shall file charges against those who have tried to damage my character."

Captain Bricker asked Salt for the picture which he intended to take to police headquarters.

"May I see it a moment?" Penny requested.

He gave the picture to her. She studied it and her face brightened. "Captain Bricker, look at this!" she exclaimed, pointing to an object in the car which barely was noticeable.

Everyone gathered about Penny, peering at the photograph. On the rear seat of the car driven by Mr. Cordell was a box which plainly bore the printing: "Salvage Company—Explosives."

"Ed McClusky who works for the Salvage Company, told me that dynamite had been stolen from his firm," Penny declared. "And here it is in Mr. Cordell's automobile! Apparently, he wasn't just driving by the plant at the time of the explosion! This picture proves why he was there!"

"Right you are, young lady," chuckled Captain Bricker. "You've pinned the goods on him for fair." Prodding the *Mirror* editor with his stick, he ordered curtly: "Get along, you! This puts a different face on it. You'll be spending the rest of the night in the Safety building."

After Mr. Cordell, still protesting his innocence, had been taken away, Penny, her father, and Salt returned to the deserted newspaper building.

"Will Cordell manage to get free?" she asked anxiously.

"Not a chance of it," Mr. Parker answered. "That picture tags him right. With Ed McClusky and Ben



to testify against him, he's the same as convicted now."

"Speaking of Ben, what's to be done about him, Dad?"

"We'll give him a job here. He's had unfair treatment, but we'll make it up to him. However, we'll have to let one employee go."

"Not me?" Penny asked anxiously.

"No," her father laughed. "It's your friend, Elda Hunt. Her attitude isn't right. We've tried to give her a chance, but over and over she has demonstrated that she isn't cut out to be a newspaper woman."

"She'll probably blame me for her discharge," Penny sighed. "Not that it matters. I ceased worrying about Elda a long while ago."

"She'll have no difficulty getting work elsewhere, and I hope she'll be better adjusted."

"How about the story of Mr. Cordell's arrest? And the picture?" Penny inquired. "Will the *Star* print them tomorrow?"

"On the front page of our first edition," Mr. Parker chuckled. "Salt didn't turn over the plate to the police, so we're all set. By morning, the story should be bigger and better than ever. By then, the guilt will be well pinned on Cordell, and some of the *Snark* gang may have been rounded up."

Curious to learn the very latest details, Salt called the police station. He was told that Ben Bartell had

identified several of the *Snark's* crew from police pictures, and it was expected all would be arrested within twenty-four hours.

"Not a bad night's work;" Mr. Parker chuckled, as he snapped off the photography room lights. "Everything locked?"

"How about the skylight?" asked Penny.

"Open again," reported Salt as he checked it. "It's just no use trying to get folks to cooperate around here. Too many fresh air fiends."

"Let it stay unlocked," Mr. Parker directed carelessly. "With our prowler safely behind bars, we've no further cause for worry." He looked at his watch. "Now, even though it is late, suppose we go and celebrate?"

"Oh, fine!" cried Penny. "And why not stop at the Safety building and ask Ben Bartell to go with us? I want to tell him about his new job."

"So do I," agreed her father heartily. "Where shall we go?"

Penny linked arms with Salt and her father, skipping as she piloted them down the dark hall.

"Just a quiet place where they serve big juicy steaks," she decided. "If I know Ben, that's what he would like best of all."